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Chief Justice Speaks Out on Court Security, Need for New Courthouses and Judgeships

'State of the Judiciary' Address to California Legislature

Sacramento—Noting recent tragic events in courthouses across the nation, California Chief Justice Ronald M. George yesterday sought support for a measure that would provide critical funding for the repair and renovation of many of the state's 451 court facilities.

Senate Bill 59, introduced by Senator Martha Escutia, would help finance upgrades to state court facilities, many of which are in a state of serious disrepair.

"Courthouses must be a safe harbor to which members of the public come to resolve disputes that often are volatile," the Chief Justice stated in his tenth annual "State of the Judiciary" Address to the California Legislature. "Once courthouses themselves are perceived as dangerous, the integrity and efficacy of the entire judicial process is in jeopardy."

"Two-thirds of our courthouses lack adequate security," the Chief Justice continued. "In many of our courthouses, there is no way to separate victims, defendants, witnesses, and spectators, including gang members, who must share space in hallways."

In addition to security concerns, some court facilities suffer from toxic mold, several remain housed in trailers, and three-fourths do not comply with the Americans With Disabilities Act, he noted.

Chief Justice George also asked legislators to support three other statutory measures that are important to California courts.

- **New judgeships:** Senators Joe Dunn and Dick Ackerman have introduced Senate Bill 56 to create new judgeships, which have not kept pace with population and caseload growth. "In the last 20 years, California has experienced a 50 percent increase in population, yet

(over)

only 41 new judgeships have been created,” the Chief Justice said. The total number of judicial positions is about 1600.

- **Uniform filing fees:** “The proliferation of different fees for court users has bred confusion and inequities across the state,” the Chief Justice said. A coalition of groups representing counties, courts, bar associations, and others are developing a method to implement a statewide uniform fee structure. The results of these efforts may be placed in a budget trailer bill.
- **Judicial Retirement System:** Inequities in this system have resulted in a loss of experienced judges from the bench. Senators Dunn and Ackerman have introduced Senate Bill 538 to address these issues.

PROPOSALS TO AMEND CONSTITUTION

With the guidance of Senators Dunn and Ackerman, the Judicial Branch also has developed draft proposals to amend Article VI of the state Constitution, the Chief Justice told lawmakers.

“Article VI has been the subject of frequent study and debate during the last half century, sometimes resulting in change, sometimes not—but each time reflecting the sense that improvements to the Article would enable our branch to better perform its responsibilities and provide additional accountability to our sister branches of government and to the public,” Chief Justice George stated.

Some proposals under discussion involve evaluating the need for new judgeships; setting judicial salaries by a neutral commission; increasing the terms of trial court judges; and ensuring budget stability for the courts.

The proposals also would clarify the role of the Judicial Council, the policymaking body for state courts; expand its membership; and affirm the council’s goal of having its membership reflect the diversity of the state.

JUDICIAL BRANCH ACCOMPLISHMENTS

The state’s top jurist also reviewed the accomplishments of the judicial branch in the past year, many of which were made possible by the Legislature’s support. Funding for the \$10 million Equal Access Fund

and the establishment of child support facilitators and self-help centers “truly make a difference for thousands of Californians,” the Chief Justice observed.

Turning to the Supreme Court, the Chief Justice reported that the high court’s special educational session in San Diego last fall drew a “phenomenal response” with thousands of high school students viewing the televised oral arguments, studying briefs, and taking part in classroom discussions. The court hopes to hold a similar session in Shasta County in October 2005, the jurist noted.

The full text of the “State of the Judiciary” Address may be viewed on the California Courts Web site at www.courtinfo.ca.gov .

For more information on trial court facilities, see <http://www.courtinfo.ca.gov/programs/occm/publications.htm> .

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